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# FAITH AS RADICAL OBEDIENCE

February 4, 1968

Mark 1:14-22; 2:13, 14

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There is a certain justifiable aversion for the word "radical". In the idiom of the 1960's "radical" has become synonymous with "extremism", and conjures up images of wild irrationality and fanaticism. Radical seems to be a good word to describe the ghetto dweller who wants action immediately and is willing to burn and destroy in order to get it. "Radical" fits the angry young Christians who would abandon the institutional church and all its traditionalism like a sinking ship. Politically the word "radical" is employed to describe the extremists of both left and right. In short, we are threatened by the word "radical" because by its very nature it stands in opposition to the status-quo. To us the radical is "way-out" - the opponent of stable sanity, order and reason.

And yet "radical" is a good, albeit corrupted, word. Webster defines radical as that which is "...fundamental, reaching to the center or ultimate source; affecting the vital principle or principles." That is to say, a true radical is one who gets directly to the heart of the matter without much concern for the peripheral.

In this sense, radical is a good Christian word, a very appropriate New Testament word. For, if we take that document at all seriously, it becomes obvious that Christian Faith is best described as radical obedience to Jesus Christ. Radical obedience is precisely what we see happening between Jesus and his disciples.

Think about the New Testament lesson read this morning. From his period of testing in the desert Jesus came to Galilee, and walking beside the sea he encountered two fishermen plying their trade. Simon and Andrew were their names, and the encounter is brief and to the point. Jesus said "follow me" and they put down their nets and followed.

A little later he found two more - James and John - mending their nets. Again "Follow me" and they left all behind and followed. Still later he passed a tax office and saw Levi, or Matthew as he is better known. "Follow me".... "And he rose and followed him."

Mark adds to his account the pregnant commentary that the people of Capernaum were astonished at this display of authority - and well they might have been, for it is a rather remarkable sequence of events. The call of Christ was radical - direct, without adornment or explanation. The response was equally radical - immediate, without justification or rationalization. But more important, this whole tableau is radical in that it is fundamental: it focusses directly on the heart of the matter. It says that Christianity begins with the call - "Follow me"; and that faith is born when men do just that, and that alone - when they get up and follow.

It's uncomfortable to be this honest with the New Testament. The idea that Christian faith is radical obedience to Jesus Christ is an alien and perhaps repugnant idea to us, not only due to our aversion toward the word radical (and obedience) but because our entire conception of the word faith - our entire way of dealing with Christianity is based on a different set of premises. Time has watered down the radical thrust of the Gospel: Christianity has become a respectable religion with creeds and traditions. And obedience to this blunt call of Christ simply isn't in the picture.

If the drama of the New Testament lesson this morning were being written today the sequence might be something like this: the initial encounter would be much more gentle, the story would be softened; instead of a call to "get up and follow" we would begin with a theological presentation of our belief that Jesus Christ was the son of God. This would be followed by a persuasive argument detailing the merits and validity of the Christian claim. There would ensue an extended period of thought and discussion - perhaps weeks or months, during which time it is hoped that "faith" will happen: that the prospective disciple will be able to accept

intellectually the thesis before him and gradually begin to feel its truth. The next step is to join the Church - but still we must proceed slowly; it takes quite a while to learn all about this Christianity business, and the new disciple is granted another extended period of time for growth and nurture. Through all of this we hope that the new disciple will come to have a firm faith and ultimately become an enthusiastic and satisfied Christian. Through all of this runs the common conception that faith is something we feel and understand: ~~of~~ a gradual, soft sell. Obedience - Radical obedience - these abrasive terms are best ignored, at least until the disciple gets his feet on the ground.

Simon, Andrew, James, John and Matthew wouldn't have recognized any of this. This isn't the same thing at all: for them the sequence was - confrontation - call - response. They either obeyed the call or disobeyed. It was as simple as that. It's difficult for us to accept - but the fact is that Christianity began with no confession, no creed, no theology, no arguments, no persuasion - just a man: a confrontation with other men: a call: a response.]

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his excellent book The Cost of Discipleship, uses this passage as the foundation for his argument that the radical Gospel of the New Testament is best described today as a Gospel of "cheap grace". He points out that the modern man simply cannot accept the story of the disciples as it is told. They must have known him before: surely they had heard him preach and had been thinking and praying about what he said. When the call came they were prepared. By hook or crook we find it necessary to insert something between the call and the response - some period of time that would allow faith to grow, a faith strong enough to get up and walk away from the tax table to follow Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer pinpointed this as the fatal error of contemporary Christianity. When we begin to make obedience dependent on faith: when we expect men to first find faith and then obey Christ - we eliminate the possibilities of faith altogether. In a now famous phrase he put it this way: "...there is no road to faith or discipleship, no other road - only obedience to the call of Christ." [1] The abrupt sequence of events in the New Testament is of the greatest significance.

I believe, very deeply, that Bonhoeffer had hold of something important here. I believe the Christian faith is not very vital, not very meaningful to us precisely because we have reversed the sequence. By blunting the sharp edge, by making faith a vague emotional/intellectual capacity that must precede obedience we effectively rule out the possibility that it will ever happen.

Of course, it is extremely difficult to define faith: to say what it is and who has it. And yet I think we can make the observation that, whatever it is, it is in short supply. I think we can look around us and observe that Christian faith is a rather minimal addendum to our common life: that there is little enthusiasm, little commitment. I think we can observe perennially empty pews in this sanctuary, and all others, and deduce that there is a vast difference between the going conception of faith today and the conception that the New Testament proclaims. I don't think it is unfair to characterize the average churchman, and I include all of us in this, as a well intentioned agnostic, who in varying degrees is committed to the church as an institution, who periodically wrestles with questions of theology - looking to the church for answers, who nurtures the undying expectation that someday through all of this - "faith" will somehow happen to him. He is one who is quite willing to give himself generously to a good cause - but - he wants to understand it first, he wants to be captivated, to feel it in his heart, to experience its urgency. Put another way, he wants to have faith first and then he will obey. In the case of Jesus Christ, he needs to know who he is and what he's all about, and then - perhaps - he can be brought to a position of obedient commitment.

And it rarely happens, and the reason it rarely happens is that faith and obedience converge: you cannot have one without the other. Faith simply does not happen to a man - true faith - until he answers the call of

Christ. There's no other way.

There is a rather simple analogy here with human relationships -- particularly a loving relationship. We do not understand a person first and then love him. Love comes first -- and out of love understanding is born. If we reversed this procedure, if we examined each other in depth, if we weighed the pros and cons of another's personality before committing ourselves in love, it is doubtful that love would ever happen.

So it is with faith: it just doesn't happen. It begins in obedience -- in that extremely personal, extremely radical act of following Christ. One man expressed it this way: "Who is this who asks us to follow? We want to know who he is before we follow him, and that is understandable enough except that the truth of the matter is that it is only by first following him that we can begin to find out who he is." [2]

[And D. T. Myles speaks the same word even more clearly: "The New Testament speaks of it (Christian FAith) as a race to be run, a war to be waged, a wrestling to be undertaken.... The only way to understand what it means to run a race is to train for it and to run it. The only way to know what it means to engage in a fight is actually to fight. The only way to know what wrestling is, is to meet one's opponent in a wrestling match. To be a Christian is to engage in an activity, recognizing that by such activity alone will understanding also come as to what the Christian faith is." [3]

We have not learned that, obviously. For many of us it is still a waiting game, waiting for understanding -- waiting for faith -- and there will be no end to our wait -- until we get up and follow.

[When Christ came to the tax office, Matthew had no faith: no understanding: no program for the future. Christ called and Matthew followed; that is, he obeyed -- he got up and took a step that put him in a new place where faith was possible.] Is it that we have not heard the call? Is it that the Church has come to us as a salesman, with a case full of creedal statements and organizations and committees and dinners and the nebulous hope that the man Jesus Christ is somehow behind it all? If that is so, God forgive the Church. For the task of the Church -- the task of preaching -- the celebration of the Sacraments -- all of it exists only to present this man -- and to articulate the call -- "follow me"

[But follow where? Matthew saw a man and a road ahead -- he heard and looked into piercing eyes and perhaps felt a kind of love he didn't know existed. Matthew was there -- we are here -- Follow where? I think that question answers itself when we begin to see that faith and obedience converge at the same point in our lives.] I think several obvious answers might sound like this: "Worship God regularly -- because the worshipping community of Christians is the body of Christ and he dwells in their midst. Give yourself -- generously, sacrificially. Love someone you can't bear to love. Do something you know is right and good but which will hurt you to do. Extend a helping hand to a child, a neighbor, a friend or a stranger -- when it is unnecessary and inconvenient to do so. Get up and follow -- for the direction of the journey becomes clear once we have decided to take it." Faith happens when we follow: faith happens when we obey the call of Jesus Christ and not before.

[Christianity has fallen on hard times, there can be no doubt about that. It is called the "post Christian era" and the obituary is already being written for the Church of Jesus Christ. And I believe the reason is totally that we have reversed the procedure: the Gospel is watered down: there is nothing radical about it. Instead of a man -- we present to the

world a program. Instead of his call - we very carefully speak an inoffensive philosophy. There is no adventure, nothing to inspire - and nobody much interested.

Paul Scherer, a great professor and preacher, reminds us that: "...long years ago the sailors of Sir Francis Drake used to sit on the rocky coasts of England telling the country lads, not about the pleasures of the sea, but of its dangers: they talked of highways and stout winds and gallant ships riding out the storms, until those country boys wanted it so much they would run away from home to become part of it." [4]

There is something like that in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There is something like that in the call, "Follow me".

And there is something deep down in every one of us that longs to make response - to get up and follow.. Amen. ]

- [1] The Cost of Discipleship, p. 49, Macmillan, New York, 1949
- [2] Frederick Buechner, The Magnificent Defeat, p. 98, The Seabury Press, New York, 1966
- [3] The Power at Work Among Us, p. 10, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1967
- [4] Interpreting the Times, p. 32, National Council of Churches, 1967  
quoted by George Peters